



**INTEROPERABILITY** Multinational students from eight nations participate in discussions on rule of law, governance and the legal aspects of military assistance operations at the International Special Training Centre. *U.S. Army photo.*



## ISTC: Building Persistent NATO SOF Interoperability and Strengthening the Alliance at the “Tip of the Spear”

BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL HARRY. C. MARSON

The International Special Training Centre is the only multinational special operations forces training organization in Europe that focuses specifically on training special forces and their enablers at the tactical level. The ISTC, established through a memorandum of understanding, is comprised of nine NATO allies (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Turkey and the United States) that solely focuses on building multinational SOF interoperability and serves as a focal point to provide the most current, relevant and cost-effective training for NATO SOF and SOF support soldiers.

Located in Pfullendorf, Germany, the ISTC has had a direct relationship with German Special Forces for more than three decades. This relationship has evolved over time changing from the International Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol School, rooted in Cold War intelligence and surveillance missions, to its current form serving at the cutting edge of training and preparing SOF Soldiers and their enablers for the complexities of the modern battlefield. Colocated and operated in concert with the Ausbildungszentrum Spezielle Operationen, the German equivalent of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, the ISTC is shaping the future of SOF tactical training in Europe.

### Multinational Interoperability is our Focus

The ISTC is focused on providing current and relevant SOF tactical training and maintaining the levels of NATO SOF interoperability forged over the last 13 years of conflict. Experience gained and lessons gleaned from MOU nations as well as other NATO and Partnership for Peace nations in the U. S. European Command, U.S. Central Command and U.S. Africa Command areas of responsibility has further reinforced the critical need for interoperability between all NATO allies. Current training at the ISTC ranges from SOF medical training and direct action, to the more cerebral Special Operations Task Group Planning and Military Assistance Courses. All ISTC courses fall within one of three branches: Tactical, Medical and Planning. Curriculum is a collaborative effort based on the interests and collective national requirements of the nine MOU nations with a focus on maintaining relevancy and interoperability as key selling points. Classes at the ISTC are small and focused on low student-to-instructor ratios to afford students the best possible training. The intent is for students to return to their respective nation, prepared to articulate, demonstrate and inculcate the lessons they have learned at the ISTC. ISTC courses also serve as part of the SOF pipeline for many of the NATO countries and/or serve as prerequi-





**QUICK RESPONSE** Multinational soldiers load a simulated casualty onto a UH-60 Black Hawk during the ISTC Advanced Medical Responder Course. U.S. Army photo by Martin Greeson.

sites for awarding their respective SOF identifiers. The current ISTC curriculum includes 12 specific courses that are open to all NATO and PFP nations:

- SOTG Operations Planning Course
- Military Assistance Course
- Conduct After Capture Course
- Conduct After Capture Instructor Course
- Advanced Medical First Responder Course
- Advanced Casualty Sustainment Course
- Tactical Combat Casualty Care Train the Trainer Course
- Close Quarter Battle Course
- Advanced CQB Course
- Combat Marksmanship Course
- Basic Sniper Course
- High Angle/Urban Sniper Course

The ISTC is also in the process of developing a Desert Sniper Course to meet multinational demand from nations operating in and around the Trans-Sahel.

## The ISTC Construct

The ISTC is a U.S.-led organization, but what makes it unique is the full integration of the multinational officers and NCOs who serve in leadership and primary staff positions and comprise the decision-making body of the organization. This unique construct gives each nation equal weight in the organization, encouraging long-term ownership and investment from partner nations. Like its American counterpart USAJFKSWCS, the ISTC shares the philosophy that the

instructors are the “center of gravity” from which it draws its greatest strength. All ISTC instructors are individually selected from within SOF units of partner nations. The MOU countries are focused on ensuring that ISTC instructors are the most experienced and best trained instructors in the world. It is this investment that allows ISTC cadre the ability to provide its unique multinational perspective and reinforce the commitment to interoperability between the nations. These long-term relationships, developed on a persistent basis, provide perspective and access to each nation at the tactical level. Aggregate experiences include: Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Mali, Kazakhstan, Somalia, Eritrea, Rwanda, Sudan, Lebanon, East Timor, Philippines, Panama, Honduras, Colombia, Congo, Senegal, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan.

## SOF/GPF Interdependence

The U.S. element of the ISTC is headquartered at the Joint Multinational Training Command through U. S. Army Europe. This relationship allows the ISTC to work closely with all USAREUR units with an endstate of conducting mutually beneficial METL-based training, creating SOF/conventional forces interoperability and ultimately reinforcing the interdependence with conventional forces. Additionally, with units like the JMRC, JMSC, CAT-C, 12th Combat Aviation Brigade, 212th CSH, 421st MMB, 18th MP, and 66th MI supporting multiple ISTC courses, many ISTC students are exposed to assets, capabilities and tactics, techniques and procedures that they would not ordinarily experience during home-station training. This interaction pays dividends as relationships between NATO SOF and





**TEAMWORK** Multinational students attending the ISTC Advanced Close Quarter Battle Course participate in a field training exercise. *U.S. Army photo by Gertrud Zach.*

U. S. conventional force units often carry over to the battlefield where they work together. This is currently happening in Afghanistan and Africa.

## Leaning Forward in the NATO Foxhole

The ISTC has come a long way from its nascent days of teaching Soviet-based order of battle and vehicle recognition classes. It stands today as one of the most proactive and responsive training centers in Europe. It has only achieved this recognition through the efforts of forward-thinking, innovative professionals dedicated to providing world-class tactical training, incorporating the most recent and relevant tactics, techniques and procedures with access to the latest battlefield technologies. One example of this is the annual Sniper Workshop hosted by the ISTC, where subject-matter experts from the MOU nations' training centers meet to discuss innovation, best practices and training locations throughout Europe. Its sole focus is providing the best training possible to the MOU nations and NATO allies. This year's U. S. participants included elements from 1st Special Warfare Training Group (Airborne), the U. S. Army Sniper School and the U. S. Army Marksmanship Unit as well as representatives from training centers of 11 NATO countries. These working groups serve to drive the curriculum at ISTC to meet the needs of the current operational environment. The Desert Sniper Course is but one outcome of this year's effort.

ISTC also serves as an assessment and testing center for new SOF technology. Throughout the year ISTC instructors and students test and evaluate the latest advances, such as new sniper systems,

unmanned aerial systems and ground tactical robots. To this end, the ISTC works closely with organizations such as Defense Advanced Research Project Agency, Research, Development and Engineering Command, Combating Terrorism Technical Support Office, Sky-Watch and the Joint Military Simulations Center under the Joint Multinational Training Command. The benefit to each nation is reduced research and development costs and exposure to the latest in new technologies that would otherwise be unavailable. This synergy reinforces the ISTC's effort to build a common platform and reinforce multinational SOF interoperability at the tactical level. The ISTC is currently in the process of procuring the CTTSO/Conflict Kinetics 'Gunfighter Gym' for incorporation into courses and as a stand-alone trainer for Germany's harsh winter.

## Smart Defence

The ISTC operates as a cost-share organization with the annual capital expenditures spread equally across the nine MOU nations. The annual operating costs, excluding personnel costs (which are borne by each respective nation), are shared in proportion to the costs of the courses and number of students attending from each nation. This means that each nation can invest as much or as little as their national budgets allow. Additionally, MOU nations can receive credits against their cost-share for direct (in-kind) course support, such as providing ammunition or medical supplies. In these cases, the monetary value of the ammunition or medical supplies is credited to the MOU nation, reducing its total *monetary* obligation.





**SNOWED IN** Multinational sniper teams engage down-slope targets in the High Angle/Urban Sniper Course in the Alps of Austria. U.S. Army photo.

Recognizing the benefits of multinational SOF interoperability and knowing the reality of the current fiscal environment, an increasing number of NATO allies and Partnership for Peace nations are aggressively pursuing relationships with the ISTC. Currently, the ISTC is engaged in discussions with three additional NATO nations and one PFP nation for near-term accession to the MOU. The overall goal over the next five years is to bring all NATO and PFP units under the ISTC umbrella.

## Return on Investment

In the last five years, the ISTC has trained more than 3,000 soldiers from Special Forces and similar units across 20 nations, directly resulting in increased NATO and PFP nations' SOF interoperability and capacity for present and future operations.

ISTC training provides direct effects across three geographic combatant commands. In the USEUCOM AOR, nations train to develop interoperability and capability in defense of their homeland and NATO strategic objectives. These nations also export these capabilities while conducting bilateral and multinational military assistance operations throughout the USAFRICOM AOR. Finally, select nations have employed this training in direct combat and counterinsurgency operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and throughout the USCENTCOM AOR.

ISTC instructors serve as 'seed corn' that return to their nations to pass their knowledge and experience from the ISTC to their home-station training programs as a return on their 2-to-3-year investment. Operating in line with NATO "Smart Defence" initiatives and utilizing a cost-share approach, the annual U. S. cost share of \$275,000 equates to that of a single joint combined exchange training engagement. Dollar for

dollar, coupled with 24/7 persistent NATO SOF engagement, ISTC is the best long-term investment in the multinational SOF market.

*"My vision for the alliance's future builds on the successes of the past. It retains what makes our alliance unique and indispensable. It rebalances our collective military capacity. And it reinforces our common political resolve. Because now, and after 2014, we can only stay successful together."* — NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

To this end state, the ISTC is postured for the future by providing the most relevant, cost-effective, tactical-level SOF training in the world, built on a foundation of multinational interoperability long before the first shot is fired. **SW**

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## Notes:

1. Rasmussen, Anders F. (2013). Statement to the 2013 Munich Security Conference, February 2, 2013.